

VZCZCXRO8849
PP RUEHPT
DE RUEHBY #0956 2660650
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 220650Z SEP 08
FM AMEMBASSY CANBERRA ZDK
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0218
INFO RUEHBN/AMCONSUL MELBOURNE PRIORITY 5586
RUEHPT/AMCONSUL PERTH PRIORITY 3859
RUEHDN/AMCONSUL SYDNEY PRIORITY 3789
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

UNCLAS CANBERRA 000956

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [AS](#)
SUBJECT: TURNBULL GIVES LIBERALS A BOOST IN THE POLLS

REF: CANBERRA 915

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Two opinion polls released September 22 suggest the Liberal Party made the right decision installing Malcolm Turnbull as leader. Although the Australian Labor Party (ALP) remains well in front, one poll has the ALP's support at its lowest since November 2006, and the other has Turnbull leading Rudd on the issue of the economic management. The polls have provided a morale boost to the Liberals, who have begun attacking Rudd over the economy and his numerous overseas trips. With Rudd leaving September 22 on a three-day trip to UNGA, he is vulnerable to criticism that he should not be leaving Australia in the middle of a global financial crisis. END SUMMARY

THE POLLS

¶2. (U) A Newspann poll conducted 19-21 September (after Turnbull became Opposition Leader on September 16, see reftel) has the ALP's lead dropping from 56-44 to 55-45 on the two-party preferred vote. Rudd still holds a big lead as preferred prime minister, 54-24, but this new result is eight points better for the Liberals than it had been under its former leader Brendan Nelson. On the issue of the economy, Turnbull leads Rudd 43-41 (the first time Rudd has trailed on this issue since becoming Prime Minister). An AC Nielsen Poll conducted September 18-20 showed the ALP's margin falling from 55-45 to 52-48 and Rudd's lead as preferred Prime Minister dropping to 56-33 from 65-19. The Coalition even leads on a head-to-head basis against the ALP, 42 to 41 percent. This is the ALP's worst AC Nielsen poll result under Rudd, and the worst since November 2006 when, under Kim Beazley, it also led 52-48.

RUDD UNDER FIRE

¶3. (U) Rudd is under fire from the Opposition and some in the media for deciding to attend this week's meeting of the General Assembly - his 16th overseas trip since becoming Prime Minister only 10 months ago. Turnbull has accused Rudd of "mistaking motion for action" and behaving like a "prime tourist" rather than a Prime Minister. Since he became leader, Turnbull has primarily attacked Rudd on the economy, alleging a lack of "economic leadership." He is now arguing that with the international economic situation so precarious, the Prime Minister should be in Australia, not heading to New York. Turnbull is also continuing Nelson's attacks on Rudd over his refusal to immediately raise the payments for single old-age pensioners.

LIBERALS LOOKING MORE COMPETITIVE

¶4. (SBU) COMMENT: There is nothing unexpected about these poll results; most new leaders give their parties a bounce. Turnbull assumes the leadership at a fortunate time. Economic management - traditionally the Coalition's strong suit - is moving to center stage in the political debate.

Frustration is also growing in the media at the Prime Minister's cautious, bland, and bureaucratic approach. The ascension of Turnbull, a strong media performer, may force the Prime Minister to reassess his style. Turnbull has made the Coalition competitive, but history is against his beating Rudd. No first-term government has lost reelection since 1931.

MCCALLUM